

Stitches



by Mary McCallum

It was May's last day with Harriet Marwick. When she woke up, this was the first thing she thought. The second thing she thought was that Angel was dead. Her skinny white cat, who'd normally be snuggling in bed, keeping her warm, was in heaven with all the other angels. How many birds had Angel killed? May wondered. Would they be up there, too, along with all the mice?

On the other side of the door, May could hear the rustles and snappings as Papa set the fire, the *whht* of the match, and the low roar as the fire took hold and began to heat the stove for breakfast. May snuggled under the blankets and moved closer to Rose. Her sister snorted in her sleep and turned over. It was so cold May's scalp tingled.

Now Papa was polishing the family boots: *shoe-shoe-shoe* with the brush. Seven pairs, one by one. Her father was a cobbler and had made them all by hand, from Ma's high-buttoned black boots to the soft leather slippers for the baby. He'd stitched those by lamplight at the kitchen table.

"You take after your old dad, May," Papa had said, too many times for May to count. "Nimble fingers." He'd shown her how to thread a needle in the blink of an eye, how to sew an even row of tiny stitches. When she turned twelve and finished school, it was Papa who had encouraged May to work in people's homes, helping with their dressmaking. How many dresses had she sewn over the past year? Fourteen? No, it was sixteen if you included the two little ones she'd made for Harriet's cousin. So many bolts of fabric and pin-pricked fingers, so many tiresome stitches.

Here was Ma's voice in the kitchen. The sound of the kettle. It was time for May to get moving. "Up," she said to her sister, providing a jab in the ribs for good measure.

Rose grumbled but didn't open her eyes.

"Now," hissed May. "It's my last day," she added, a sad catch in her voice. Not that this was of any consequence to Rose. She was top of the class at Thorndon School and not at all interested in what May did all day. Rose claimed she was going to stay on at school because she was so good at it. May wasn't so sure. Why would things be any different for Rose? May had been top of her class, too.



Before she threw back the covers, May's eyes fell on the brand-new Wheeler & Wilson sewing machine, which stood black and gleaming like a cat on the dresser. How wonderful of Papa to buy it for her! He'd talked about nothing else since he'd brought it home: how many dresses May could sew in a week *right here in her bedroom*, how much money she could make, what a help it would be. May jumped out of bed, pulled a cardigan over her nightgown, and went through to the kitchen.

Her parents were sitting at the table, drinking tea. The oaty smell of porridge filled the kitchen, and all in a row by the back door were the polished boots, lined up from biggest to smallest. May could hear the boys fighting in their bedroom while they got dressed. They were always fighting.

"Good morning, Maysie," said Ma, patting the chair beside her. "Warm up by me."

Her father nodded. "Last day, eh? Your mama's looking forward to you being home for a bit."

"We'll make a good team," said Ma, her eyes encouraging. "I'll enjoy the company."

May wanted to say something nice back, but she couldn't. What she felt right then was far from nice. Finishing up with Harriet and her family was far worse than her last day at school.

"I need to use the privy, Ma," she said, trying to smile. She walked past her mother and the iron stove with its warm belly, pulled on her boots, and headed outside.

The sun hadn't yet come over the hills, and there was an extra-deep coldness in the garden as if the night had left something behind. "Last day, last day, last day," the frosty grass crunched. May balled up her fists inside the sleeves of her cardigan. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" she hissed back through her teeth.

"It was exciting, wasn't it?" she thought. A brand-new sewing machine? Working at home? May didn't want to disappoint her parents, but she was worried. What if she had a problem with sewing in a sleeve – who would help her? And more importantly, who would she talk to? Ma would be busy with the baby. There would be no Harriet.

After May had dressed and fed the chooks and told off the boys and eaten her breakfast of porridge and milk, she set off for Harriet's house, out through the gate and down the zigzag to Tinakori Road. She loved the zigs and she loved the zags, each with its own view of the city. The zigs took her towards the new Botanic Gardens, with the roses and the spindly trees and the glow worms at night, and the zags took her towards the harbour, shiny as a mirror today. She felt like two different people as she walked: a zig person and a zag person. Zig. Zag. Excited. Sad.

Six weeks at the Marwicks'. It had gone so quickly. While they stitched, May had listened to Harriet talk about her wedding plans: Silk or satin? Rosebuds or lilies? Great-aunt Joan with the beak nose or not Great-aunt Joan with the beak nose? There was no shortage of things to discuss.

Harriet's house was the best place May had ever worked. She'd been very happy there. Not all of her placements had been so good.

As soon as she'd heard May was leaving school, Mrs Crane from around the corner had asked if she would help finish off a black mourning dress because Mr Crane had died. Mrs Crane had a strange little cough and eyes that shone like hatpins. May didn't much like doing her sewing. Before the dress was finished, Mrs Crane announced she was marrying Mr Jamieson next door and needed a wedding dress instead. They'd had to make it lickety-split, buying the pale satin from a fancy store on Lambton Quay.



After that, Mrs Drysdale up in Brooklyn had asked May to come and help sew dresses for her tour of Europe. She was a singer, so the gowns needed to have a lot of give around the chest to hold her expanding rib cage. May liked that job.

Mrs Drysdale had lots of stories about travelling the world.

Then came a family with three boys and lots of difficult little shirts and trousers. And so a year had passed, and May was thirteen. On her birthday, she was sent down the zigzag and along the road to the Marwicks'. They needed dresses for Harriet, who was sixteen and getting married. Harriet! She was supposed to be grown up, and she wasn't at all. From the first day, she'd treated May like her best friend, giggling over the story May told about Mrs Crane and the wedding dress and then telling her own story about her mother-in-law-to-be, too fat for a dress she'd had made and getting stuck with her arms in the air. They'd laughed so hard, they'd had to stop sewing and just breathe.

May and Harriet and Mrs Marwick had just the last hem and buttons to do, and the job would be over. Then Harriet would turn into a married woman and go to live in Auckland, which was just about as sad as Angel dying. From tomorrow, there would be no morning walk to the cosy house with the chair by the fire they called May's seat. No Harriet to shriek when she came through the door: "May Day, you're here!" It would be just May in her bedroom with the shiny machine that purred like a cat, pushing cotton cloth under the metal foot, under the sharp needle, and out the other side, stitched.

Ma said she was lucky. She could have been a scullery maid in one of the big houses in Thorndon, scrubbing floors for beans, or an apprentice needlewoman working for even less! May knew she was lucky. But something felt tight in her chest as she thought this, and it made her walk even faster.

She was breathless by the time she arrived at the Marwicks'. Her cheeks were hot – really hot – like you could fry an egg on them. May wiped her palms on her dress and lifted the latch of the little blue gate. As she closed it behind her, she could already hear Harriet inside, calling her name and running for the door.



illustrations by Elliemay Logan

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16



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